Writing the Depository Self-Study

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Background

A recommendation from the spring 1994 meeting of the Depository Library Council suggested the LPS (Library Programs Service) re-examine the depository inspection process. As part of this process, LPS developed a draft of a self-study to be used by depository libraries. Throughout 1995 and 1996, LPS asked libraries scheduled for inspection to complete the self-study report voluntarily. As part of the "Federal Depository Library Program Information Dissemination and Access Strategic Plan, FY 1996 – FY 2001," LPS modified the focus of the inspection program. Under the re-directed program, inspectors would visit those libraries that satisfy at least one of four criteria:

   * The library did not meet depository standards established by GPO.

   * The library had never been inspected.

   * The library requested a site-visit from an inspector.

   * The library reported exemplary services or accomplishments, including a new building.

In June 1996, LPS adopted the self-study instrument as an evaluation tool for use by depository libraries. Each depository library will submit a self-study report to LPS, which will determine the libraries that will be inspected. The basis for inspections is specified in 44 U.S.C. §1909, which states that "the Superintendent of Documents shall make firsthand investigation of conditions [in depository libraries] for which need is indicated."

In September 1996, LPS issued the Federal Depository Library Manual Supplement 3: Self-Study of a Federal Depository Library. A revised version of this manual is available on the FDLP Web site <www.access.gpo.gov /su_docs/dpos/selfstud.html>. The Web version is the official text of the self-study template and supersedes the printed manual.

In the preface to Supplement 3, LPS gives two primary purposes for the self-study. The first is to give the documents librarian as well as the library administration an opportunity to assess the library's compliance with Title 44, Chapter 19, and other GPO regulations in advance of an inspection visit to determine the library's compliance with Title 44, Chapter 19, and other GPO regulations.

Secondly, the self-study report can help the documents staff and library administration determine how the library is addressing issues such as the collection development policy for documents, the library's compliance with ADA standards, and public access to depository material in print and electronic forms.

Another use of the self-study can be to inform and educate library administrators, trustees, city officials, or college administrators about depository needs.

The library can do a self-study at any time, not just when requested by GPO. The self-study report can also be used for library or other institution accreditation.

The depository self-study is now an integral part of the inspection process. Each year, LPS requests self-study reports from a group of depository libraries based on the date of the last on-site inspection. In writing the self-study, librarians are faced with the challenging task of describing on paper the depository operation in a library.

Time Line for the Self-Study and Inspection

The following time line gives the approximate sequence of the self-study and inspection process.

   * Immediate action. The documents librarian should begin gathering documentation and drafting answers to the self-study.

   * 6 months before the due date. Informal notification and announcements at professional meetings and in Administrative Notes of depository libraries that will be required to submit a self-study to GPO in the upcoming inspection – self-study cycle.

   * 3 months before the due date. LPS formally notifies libraries via a letter to the documents librarian to submit a self-study report.

   * 3 weeks before the due date. The documents librarian should finish drafting answers and begin editing the self-study report.

   * 2 weeks before the due date. The documents librarian should finish editing the report and the library administrator should sign it.

   * 1 week before the due date. Documents librarian should mail the self-study report and addenda.

   * Due date set by LPS. Libraries are notified if a self-study was not received by GPO from them.

* During the next 3-months, library inspectors group the self-studies by state and review them.

* 6 weeks before an on-site inspection. Depository library candidates for inspection and their Regional are notified and inspection dates set.

* 4 weeks before an on-site inspection. The documents librarian being inspected and their Regional librarian will receive a report titled "Self-Study Evaluation: Summary of Findings and Recommendations" with a confirmation letter and a copy of the pamphlet "How to Prepare for a Library Inspection."

* 4 weeks before on-site inspections of depositories in each state to 8 weeks after, documents coordinators and directors of each depository library not being inspected in that state and their Regional librarian receive a report titled "Self-Study Evaluation: Summary of Findings and Recommendations" and a letter confirming they have passed GPO's inspection process based on their self-study.

* 6 to 8 weeks after an on-site inspection, the documents coordinator, library director, and the Regional librarian will receive a copy of the report titled "Inspection Report: Summary of Findings and Recommendations" based on their on-site inspection.

Preparation

Generally, the LPS staff will give the documents librarian three months' notice to prepare the self-study. In the typical depository library, the documents librarian will find that the initial self-study report will take longer than three months to complete. Depending on changes in the self-study format and the library, later self-studies may be completed faster.

1. Gather Documentation

Before writing the self-study, the documents coordinator should gather documents that relate to the depository operation.
* Previous inspection reports. If the depository has been inspected previously, these will indicate weaknesses as well as strengths previous inspectors have identified. If previous inspection reports are missing from the depository's files, contact the Regional or LPS.

* Departmental or library annual reports. These can provide previously stated goals and list accomplishments. Annual reports may also include statistics.

* The library's collection development policy for Federal Government documents. This important document should indicate which subject areas the library collects and provide a rationale for those decisions. Information about writing or revising the documents collection development policy is presented in the Federal Depository Library Manual Supplement: Collection Development Guidelines for Selective Federal Depository Libraries (September 1994), <www.access.gpo.gov/su_docs/dpos/coldev.html>.

o Policy and procedures manuals related to the depository operation processed.

o The library strategic plan. This should describe the role that the depository collection plays in the larger context of the library as a whole.

o Other institutional documents, such as library collection development policies or other publications that influence the documents collection.

* Notify Appropriate Stakeholders

Communication with appropriate stakeholders is an important key to writing a good self-study.

o The library administration. Communicate with the library's administration about the importance and implications of the self-study. Explain the procedure for the self-study. Enlist the administrator's support in the process. Explain that writing the self-study may take time away from other activities.

o The documents support staff. These individuals can contribute valuable knowledge of the self-study process. The support staff may be able to write some sections of the self-study.

o The Regionals. GPO will notify the Regionals about which libraries under their purview must turn in a self-study. The Regional may have a workshop on writing the self-study.

o Geographically proximate depositories. Generally LPS will request self-studies from most or all depositories in a state at the same time. Neighboring depositories can provide collaborative assistance in writing the self-study. E-mail is a good way for depositories to communicate about the self-study.

* Set Deadlines and Meet Them

The prudent librarian will allow plenty of time to do the self-study. The report will take longer than a week to write. Early in the drafting phase of the self-study, set a completion date that is at least 2 weeks before the report is due to LPS. After completing the draft of the report, set it aside for a few days, then re-read it for omissions and inconsistencies. Try reading it from the viewpoint of someone who is not familiar with the library's depository operation or the depository staff. If possible, ask someone outside the library to read the report.
* Check Computer Equipment

Writing the self-study report is a major investment of time and energy for the documents librarian. Before writing the answers, the documents librarian should download the text of the current self-study questions from the FDLP Web site. If computer equipment does not meet minimal technical standards, the depository may not be able to download it. Then the Regional can furnish a copy of the current self-study. Discard older versions of the template to avoid confusion. Be certain to have a secure copy of the report so no one, either library users or staff, can type over or inadvertently erase an only copy.

Writing the Self-Study

The process of writing the self-study calls on the skills of technical writing: creating, designing, and transmitting technical information so that people can understand it easily and use it appropriately. (Markel, p. 2) While all of us write policies, procedures, training manuals, and even self-studies, few of us have had formal training in technical writing. Most of us learned by doing and by making mistakes along the way. For those depository librarians faced with writing the self-study, we have some suggestions that we think will facilitate the process for the librarian and also improve the readability of the self-study report.

1. Format

The structure of the report is important. By deciding in advance how the report will be laid out, the documents librarian can save time later. The finished report should include the questions with the answers inserted. This format is easy to do using word processing software

Decide in advance on several factors:

o Font. A very small (8 point or less) or very large (14 point or greater) font size is not appropriate. The smaller font is difficult to read while the large font makes the report larger than need be. A font of the same size as the template (12 point) is ideal.

o White space. Create a visual difference between the questions and the answers on the self-study report. Double space between the question and the answer to provide white space.

o Value. Another way to differentiate between the questions and answers is through the use of bold, italic, or regular type. Consider using bold or italic type for the questions and regular type for the answers

2. Audience

Defining the audience will help shape the report. Consider the audience for the self-study report:

o The GPO inspection team. They will evaluate your report and determine if further information or action is needed. Because each inspector has worked in a depository library, he or she is familiar with the best practices of depository management. The inspectors will recognize poor management techniques as well as attempts to obfuscate. In addition, the inspectors are reading dozens of self-study reports each year. The documents librarian should have some compassion on the inspectors and make the self-study as easy to understand as possible.

The self-study supplants the on-site inspection report for many depository libraries and will serve as a record of depository operations for that time period. It will go in the depository's files at GPO and its Regional library and be a main reference tool for information on that library.

o Library administrators and officials. Administrators, library's board members, college or university officials, or others who use this and other similar reports from institutions as a measurement of where their institution is at the time.

o Documents department staff. The self-study report creates a snapshot of the department. The self-study can be a tool for learning about the department, and refreshing knowledge about GPO requirements. Each question has been included in the self-study for a reason. The writer may want to ask, "Why is this question here?" "Where is this topic addressed in depository literature?" before answering it.

3. Writing Style

A well-written self-study will be clear, concise, and consistent.

o Clear. The reader must be able to understand the answers presented in the report; therefore, the writer should present an answer that is clear, logical, and unambiguous. Answers written in the active voice tend to be clearer than those in the passive. Where possible, write the answers in the active voice. Local acronyms and terms can confuse the reader. Explain any acronyms or local terms to avoid confusion.

o Concise. The writer often has a difficult time knowing how much detail to include in an answer. A concise answer to a question on the self-study will be long enough to include all relevant material without floundering in details. Depending on the circumstances, a concise answer may be as short as a couple of sentences or as long as a couple of pages. The length of the answer is not as important as the completeness of the answer.

o Consistent. The writer (the documents librarian) should help the reader (the GPO inspector) to understand the report by presenting the material in an appropriate and predictable manner. Put the report away for a couple of days, then read through it again looking for inadvertent inconsistencies.

4. Finishing Touches

After all the hard work that goes into writing the self-study, the documents librarian will want to present the results in a professional-looking format.

o Cover page. The report should have a cover page following the self-study template. It should include the library and institution's name, location, zip, depository and U.S. Congressional district numbers, the names of the library director and documents librarian, phone and fax numbers, e-mail address, and the date the self-study was submitted.

o The date it was written should be someplace on the report.

o Contents page. The contents page should list the major sections of the self-study. A well-organized contents page can help the inspection team understand the scope and organization of the self-study. In addition, the contents page can serve as a checklist to remind the documents librarian to include all relevant parts of the self-study. The complete self-study package should include the following parts:

+ Cover sheet
+ Contents page
+ Text of the report
+ Addenda (as described in the following section)

o Staple the report. An elaborate binder is not necessary and takes up limited file space at LPS. The addenda can be paper clipped or stapled to the main body of the report.

o The average self-study is 20-25 pages, with an additional 10 pages of addenda. However, the larger and more complex the depository operation in a library, or more changes that must be described, the longer and more complicated the self-study report will be.

o Make 3 copies of the finished report. Send one to LPS, one to the Regional, and keep one in the files. Make sure a copy is sent to the Regional as well as GPO at the same time.

o Allow at least one week for mail or package delivery.

Suggested Addenda to the Self-Study

There are several items that should be attached as addenda to the self-study report. The text of the self-study asks the librarian to include 6 specific documents. The 6 required attachments are:

* The written collection development policy for Government documents (Section I, Question 5)

* The library's access policy for users of depository material (Section IV, Question 1).

* The procedures manual for processing documents (Section II, Question 5).

* The binding policy for documents (Section III, Question 1).

* The replacement policy for documents (Section III, Question 2).

* Selective housing agreements, if any.

Other attachments are optional but often helpful:

* a map of the library with locations of the documents service points, offices, and other items mentioned in the self-study.

* An organization chart of the library showing the position of the documents librarian in the library administration.

* Annual reports for the documents department. Five years of annual reports are usually sufficient.

* Position descriptions for the documents librarian/s and staff who process depository material.

* Other documents and material that will help the inspection team understand the self-study.

Common Errors

The inspection team has identified several problems that the careful writer will want to avoid.

* Incomplete answers. Writers often do not include enough information in the answers. Each answer should provide all relevant information that the inspection team needs to understand the situation.

* Misleading information. Writers sometimes give a misleading answer because they have not read what they have written carefully, do not understand the question, or do not fully explain terms, such as acronyms or local terminology.

* Overlooked or ignored questions. The documents librarian must answer each question in the self-study or explain why the question is not applicable to the library's situation. Check the completed report to be certain that no questions were overlooked.

* Answering questions with "yes" or "no" without an explanation. The answers to most yes/no questions should include an explanation. For some a sentence will suffice, others will need several paragraphs.

* Discrepancies between the library's self-study, access or other policies, and/or information on the Web page.

* Specifically troublesome questions have been:

o Section I, Question 1, identifying titles from the "Basic Collection" that are available in the depository. Each title can usually be answered with a check if received. If not received, or received in an electronic or commercial version, this should be noted.

o Section I, Question 8, identifying current indexes. The librarian should mark only those titles the library currently purchases. Electronic equivalents should be noted. Do not mark items received at a nearby depository.

o Section II, Question 1 describing recording items to the piece level. Each format should be addressed. Actual procedures do not need to be included as much as a description of how each format is handled. Include a description of what information is available on the check-in record. Many depositories have over time used a variety of techniques (card files, computer databases, or on-line check-in) to record depository receipts. Be certain to describe each component in the library's holdings record.

While challenging, writing the self-study can be a valuable experience for the documents librarian. The self-study process gives the library an opportunity to closely examine all aspects of the depository operation in a library at the depository coordinator's pace and from his vantage point. The self-study will identify weak areas where the library can improve services. At the same time, the report will identify areas of strength where the library should continue to offer optimum services. After completing the self-study report, the depository library will have a baseline of knowledge the depository staff has created on which administrators and librarians can take steps to improve the delivery of Government information to library users.

Citations

The article by Henson cited below includes suggestions on writing the self-study. In addition, most libraries will have books on technical writing. These books may include other suggestions that will be useful in writing the depository self-study.

"Exhibit 1: Federal Depository Library Program: Information Dissemination and Access Strategic Plan, FY 1996 – FY 2001," Report to the Congress, Study to Identify Measures Necessary For a Successful Transition To a More Electronic Federal Depository Library Program (June 1996) GP 3.2:EL2/3/FINAL. pp. E10-E11.

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